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Israel: Military Options in Lebanon

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An Intelligence Memorandum

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NESA 81-10066
December 1981

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Israel: Military Options in Lebanon

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An Intelligence Memorandum

*Information available as of 16 December 1981
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

The authors of this paper are [redacted]
[redacted] Office of Near East-South Asia
Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and
may be addressed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division,
NESA, [redacted]

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This paper has been coordinated with the National
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**Israel: Military Options
in Lebanon**

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Summary

Israeli officials are expressing growing concern over the Palestinian arms buildup and the continued presence of Syrian surface-to-air missile sites in Lebanon. The Israelis claim that the Palestinians have continued to receive additional heavy weapons since the cease-fire and are taking advantage of the lull in hostilities to reequip and train their forces in southern Lebanon. They also maintain that the Palestinians are increasing the pressure on Christian forces in the border enclave in the south and that UNIFIL has been ineffective in stopping Palestinian infiltration into the area. Despite Tel Aviv's resolve to maintain the cease-fire as long as possible, Defense Minister Sharon and Chief of Staff Eitan have stated publicly that Israel will respond at once if provoked by renewed Palestinian attacks on Israel's northern settlements.

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Israel has a variety of military options it can exercise against the Palestinians in southern Lebanon and the Syrian missile sites, ranging from preemptive airstrikes to launching a large-scale ground operation. The buildup of the Israel Defense Force in northern Israel following the government's de facto annexation of the Golan Heights has also significantly improved its ability to move into Lebanon in force.

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Should the Palestinians resume their artillery attacks on Israel's northern settlements or launch a major terrorist operation inside Israel, the Israelis would most likely respond with a major incursion into southern Lebanon to clean out Palestinian forces south of the Zahrani River. They would probably engage the Syrians if they attempted to aid the Palestinians. Such an engagement probably would include an attack on the Syrian SAMs in the Bekaa Valley.

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December 1981

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**Israel: Military Options
in Lebanon**

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Most Israelis view the Christian-controlled enclave in southern Lebanon as a buffer against Palestinian crossborder terrorist operations. They do not anticipate an early reconstitution of an effective central government in Lebanon and have little confidence in the UN peacekeeping forces in the area. They thus believe the Begin government must act independently to assure the security of Major Haddad's Maronite Christian militia. Most endorse providing close military, economic, and political support, and if necessary, intervening with Israeli troops.

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Should the Palestinians be held responsible for a collapse of the cease-fire established last July, Begin would come under immediate, strong domestic pressure to order a tough military response. Major new Palestinian attacks on Haddad's forces or new shelling of northern Israel would be certain to provoke heavy Israeli retaliation. But given Begin's activist inclinations, he might also cite as a pretext for Israeli intervention evidence of major Palestinian reinforcement in southern Lebanon.

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Should any of these events come to pass, senior Israeli military and intelligence officials would press Begin to order a resumption of preemptive air, naval, and commando operations and to approve a major ground incursion. They would argue against accepting US mediation before destroying the Palestinians' command, control, and resupply networks—a strategy that much of the Israeli public would support.

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**Israeli Options
in Southern Lebanon**

The Israelis have carried out a major reinforcement in the north following their de facto annexation of the Golan Heights on 14 December. The IDF buildup in the Golan Heights and along the western border with Lebanon is the largest since the Litani operation in southern Lebanon in 1978. The Israelis can now conduct a variety of operations against the Palestinians or the Syrian SAMs while providing adequate defense on the Golan Heights against a possible Syrian attack.

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The Israelis have a variety of military options in southern Lebanon. They could:

- Reinforce Haddad's militia in the enclave with additional equipment and troops and provide greater logistics support.
- Launch commando raids on Palestinian positions along the Lebanese coast and on inland targets, especially around Nabatiyah and Beaufort Castle.
- Conduct airstrikes and offshore naval bombardments against Palestinian positions, fortifications, and supply facilities throughout Lebanon.
- Conduct multibattalion operations against the Palestinians in southern Lebanon using their forces along the border and on the Golan Heights.
- Launch a major offensive similar to the Litani operation in 1978 to clean out Palestinian forces up to the Zahrani River. 


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A major Israeli ground attack into southern Lebanon would require a force of at least four combined arms brigades—approximately 8,000 to 10,000 men—supported by air and naval elements. The attack would probably involve assaults along two major axes. The main Israeli thrust would be launched from Marj Uyun in the Christian enclave across the Nabatiyah Plateau to the Zahrani River. The heavily fortified Palestinian positions at Beaufort Castle and inside the town of Nabatiyah would probably be bypassed in an attempt to isolate these positions and cut their supply lines. A second Israeli thrust launched from the western border area would move north along the Lebanese coast, attacking Palestinian forces in the Tyre pocket and eventually linking up with the Israeli thrust from the east. 

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During the attack the Israelis would conduct intensive airstrikes, offshore naval bombardments, and long-range artillery shelling of Palestinian positions in the Nabatiyah, Beaufort Castle, Tyre, and Sidon areas. Israeli heliborne commandos would be landed behind the lines to attack Palestinian headquarters, capture bridges, and hold other key positions. The Israelis would probably attempt to encircle the Palestinians and inflict maximum casualties—not follow the Litani attack precedent of allowing them to withdraw to the north. 

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Should the Israelis through such an operation eradicate the Palestinian presence below the Zahrani, it is doubtful that they would in the near term permit the Lebanese Government to reassert meaningful authority in the area. Instead, their goal would probably be to establish a larger "security area" to be policed by their Christian allies and Israeli ground, air, and naval forces. 

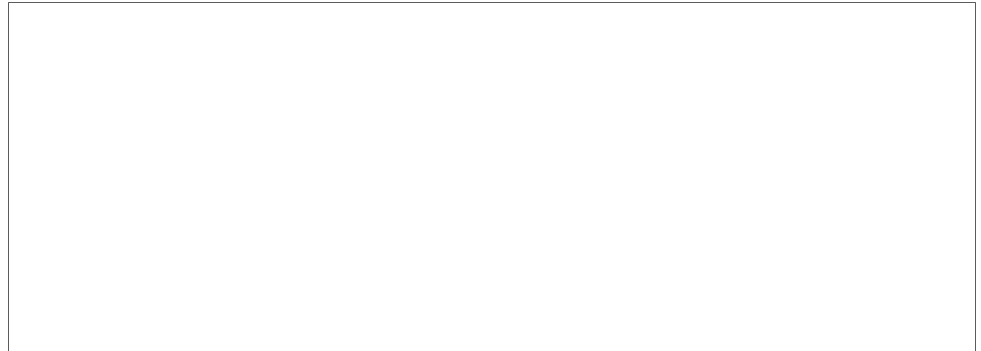
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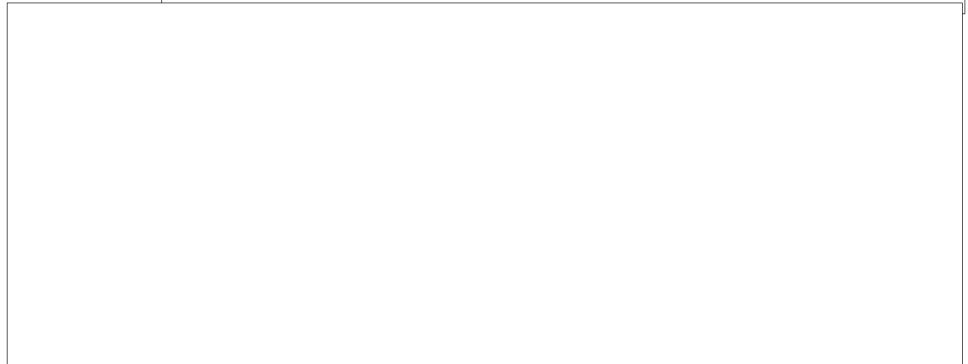
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**Constraints on
Israeli Operations**

Israeli ground operations in Lebanon would be strongly influenced by terrain and weather. The number of access routes into southern Lebanon is limited, and terrain features severely restrict cross-country movement of heavy equipment. Rain during the winter months of December through March would further complicate movement on unimproved roads in the south, and cloudy weather would limit aerial reconnaissance and air operations.

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The 6,200-man UNIFIL presence in southern Lebanon would not be a major constraint. The Israelis would probably attempt to bypass or ignore UNIFIL checkpoints and expect UNIFIL to avoid becoming engaged in the fighting.

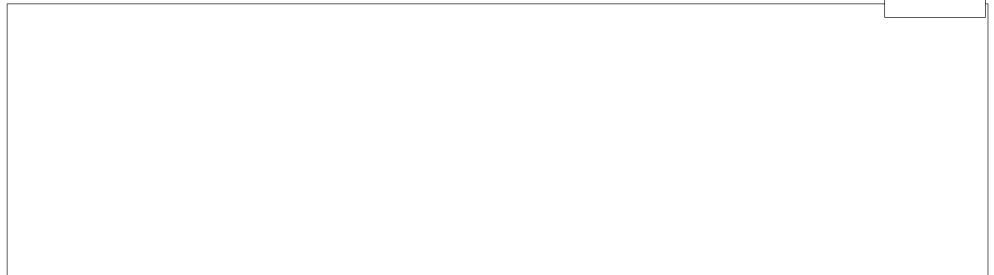
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**Palestinian Forces
in the South**

Palestinian forces in Lebanon total 20,000 to 30,000 armed guerrillas. An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 of these are deployed in southern Lebanon.

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Israeli Options Against the Syrian SAMs

The Israelis have three basic military options available to attack the Syrian missiles in Lebanon—a ground attack up the Bekaa Valley, a heliborne commando attack, or a combined missile and air attack. An Israeli ground operation against the Syrian missile sites in the Bekaa Valley is perhaps the least viable option. The narrow southern approaches to the Bekaa Valley would make the advancing Israeli forces vulnerable to flank attacks along the route. Syrian infantry, armored, and artillery units are deployed along the eastern and western flanks of the southern Bekaa less than 35 kilometers from Israel's northern border. Syria has from 6,000 to 8,000 troops, including two armored brigades and several Special Forces battalions, deployed in and around the Bekaa Valley. The Syrian forces in this area are well entrenched and prepared to conduct a defensive action in depth against an attacking Israeli force, and additional Syrian forces could reinforce units in the Bekaa in a matter of hours. An Israeli ground assault would probably result in an unacceptably high level of Israeli casualties; it would certainly risk spilling over onto the Golan and escalating into a full-scale war with Syria [redacted]

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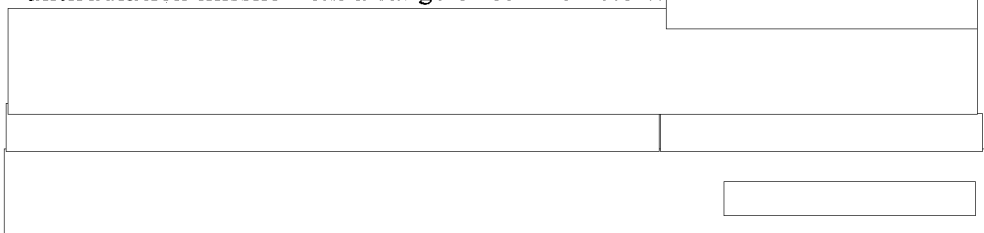
The Israelis probably would also be reluctant to conduct heliborne commando operations against the Syrian missiles. The missile sites are defended by mechanized infantry, artillery, and anti-aircraft units that could cause the attacker heavy losses, even though the Israelis would have the element of surprise. Extracting the commandos from the area, moreover, would be extremely difficult. [redacted]

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A combined Israeli missile and air attack on the Syrian SAM sites would seem to have the best chance of success with minimum risk of Israeli casualties. The Israelis could use the US-supplied Lance mobile tactical missile, which has a range of 75 kilometers, or a version of the Standard antiradiation missile with a range of 65 kilometers. [redacted]

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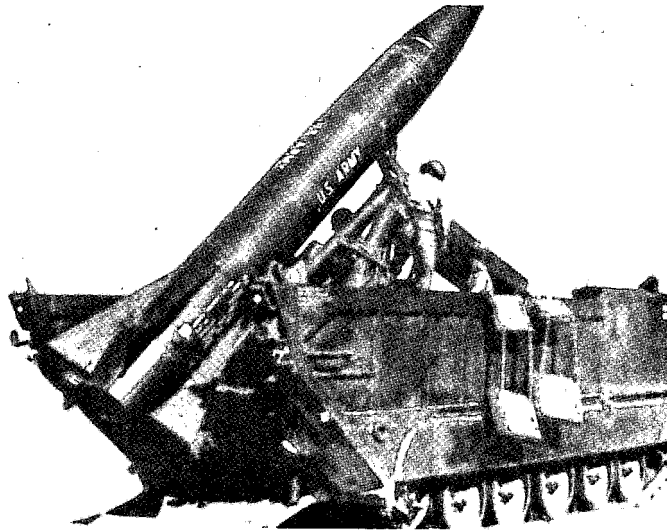
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Lance missile

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Finally, Israeli Air Force F-4s and A-4s as well as some F-15 aircraft can carry Shrike and Standard antiradiation missiles, Walleye and Maverick television-guided missiles, and an array of laser-guided or "smart" bombs

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capable of destroying the Syrian SA-6s. To be successful an Israeli air attack would rely heavily on surprise, and the attacking aircraft would have to fly low and at high speeds to escape detection by Syrian early warning radar. The Sannin Mountains form an effective radar barrier that would mask the approach of the attacking Israeli aircraft flying in low from the west. Airstrikes closely following an Israeli surface-to-surface missile attack would probably confuse and overwhelm Syrian defenses.



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